

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections based on this week's lectionary readings

December 29, 2013
Christmas A1

The readings this week:

- *Isaiah 63:7-9* ◦ *Psalms 148*
- *Hebrews 2:10-18* ◦ *Matthew 2:13-23*

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Into Darkness, Reflections on Matthew 2:13-23

Have you ever noticed how important the theme of "light" is to our cultural celebration of Christmas? There are lights everywhere this time of year – in stores, homes, streets, parks, trees – everywhere. The theme of the light come into the darkness, which is stated so beautifully in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John is a theme which gives profound meaning to our celebration of Christmas, even in contexts which are not specifically Christian and even in contexts which may be hostile to Christianity. There is something profoundly comforting and reassuring about Christmas lights illuminating the darkness of the night.

In Matthew the theme of the light of Christ being born into the darkness of this world is played out in a more dramatic fashion. The baby is born "in the time of King Herod" and he is named Jesus, Emmanuel – God Saves/God is Present. Just the mention of King Herod confirms the darkness of the world into which Jesus is born. Herod the Great was perhaps one of the greatest architects and builders in history; he was also one of the bloodiest and most brutal dictators in history. Even the Emperor Octavian Augustus, not a timid man himself, was nevertheless taken aback at the scope of Herod's violence and was known to have remarked that it was better to be Herod's dog than one of his children. What follows then in chapter 2 is first a manipulative power play between the Magi and King Herod, in which Herod is tricked. This does not make him happy and he takes out his rage and his insecurity on the children of Bethlehem in the event known as "The Slaughter of the Innocents."

All of this confirms that Jesus is born into a world of darkness: a world of murder, violence, genocide, grief, sorrow, suffering, loneliness and

fear. Jesus brings God's presence into the midst of this darkness and provides light and comfort. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it," says St. John. No matter how deep the darkness the promise of Christmas is that the light of Christ will always penetrate it with the presence of God's love and grace and in that we are offered comfort and hope.

We still live in a world of deep darkness, and the promises of God to us through the birth of Jesus at Christmas continue to bring us hope. All those twinkling lights all over the city and in our homes and in our churches remind us that the Jesus Christ, born of Mary on Christmas, is the light of the world!

[Musings About Faith, S Blake Duncan](#)



Praying Toward Sunday

God of glory,
your splendor shines from a manger in Bethlehem,
where the Light of the world is humbly born
into the darkness of human night.
Open our eyes to Christ's presence in the shadows of our
world,
so that we, like him, may become beacons of your justice,
and defenders of all for whom there is no room.
Amen.

[Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#)

Reflecting on the Word



1st Reading: [Isaiah 63:7-9](#)

What do we learn from the way that Isaiah begins his long and passionate prayer? Isaiah recalls how God brought his people out of slavery in Egypt. How do these verses describe the warmth of God's relationship with his people? [Quiet Time Bible Study, Intersivity Press](#)

Tell of the Kindness of the Lord

2013 is coming to a close, how do we close one year and begin a new? We often celebrate with a party, ring in the new year with friends or loved ones, and shouts of "Happy New Year!" As a child I remember getting to crawl out of bed, put a thick coat on over my jammies, and head out onto the front porch in the darkness of the night with my sisters, to bang on pots and pans with wooden spoons and metal spatulas. We boldly and loudly proclaimed that a new year had arrived.

For some, it is with relief they say good bye to the hold, and with trepidation that they step into the new. For others, it is "just another day," or "another year." As followers of Christ, how should we mark this unseen but momentous passage of time?

Isaiah beckons us to close the old year by recalling how God has blessed us, to tell of His kindness. In turn, we can begin the new year with the assurance and promise that He is our Savior whose love and mercy redeems us.

In the midst of the proclamations for a happy new year, take some time to recall His blessings within this past year. List them, write them down, and thank Him for His steadfastness and presence. As you ring in the new year with friends and loved ones, boldly and loudly proclaim of His kindness. In the dawn of the new year, share with your neighbors, acquaintances and even strangers, "the deeds for which He is to be praised." And in 2014, trust and know that "He will carry you to all the days of old."

Hebrews 2:10-18

He came to help us, including teaching us what it means to be human -- experiencing suffering and testing, but doing so in the light of hope. We are freed from hopelessness by trusting in God.

Psalm Reading: [Psalm 148](#)



Psalm 148, John Kohan

What is the closest you have come, this side of heaven, to experiencing a worldwide worship service such as this psalm announces? Do you look forward to heaven when this psalm finds its fulfillment, or does praising God all day long sound boring to you? How does this psalm provide a new or fresh picture of praise for you?

[Quiet Time Bible Study, Intersivity Press](#)

3rd Reading: [Hebrews 2:10-18](#)

In verse 1 we read, "pay more careful attention . . . to," and in verse 3 we are told not to "ignore." What is it that we are to focus our lives on? How does the writer strengthen the warning that God's salvation in Christ is well worth our most intense obedience (vv. 3-4)? How does Jesus help you when you are tempted? What helps you to maintain a warm, life-changing relationship with Jesus? [Quiet Time Bible Study, Intersivity Press](#)

4th Reading: [Matthew 2:13-23](#)

How has knowing Jesus involved you in a search or journey? The responses of the Magi and Herod are typical of the ways people respond to Jesus today. What factors might cause people to respond to Jesus in such radically different ways? The Magi not only found Jesus, but they worshiped him and witnessed to the entire city of Jerusalem concerning his birth (vv. 2-3). In what ways has your search for the Lord resulted in worshiping him and telling others about him? [Quiet Time Bible Study, Intersivity Press](#)